

Transforming Ethics Instruction at Fort Knox: *Molding Ethical Warriors, One Scenario at a Time*

by Chaplain (Major) Terrence Walsh

The junior leaders of the regimental task force were having a difficult time. They were in new leadership positions, and they knew that combat would be difficult, dangerous, and deadly. However, they never expected to encounter these kinds of problems so quickly.

Alpha and Bravo Troops were assigned to secure a small village, while the rest of the regiment was engaged in a movement to contact. One platoon of Alpha Troop was assigned to seize a building for use as squadron headquarters. Alpha's soldiers were warned that the building was occupied by war criminals who were wanted by an international tribunal. Pumped on adrenaline, they secured the first floor and then charged into the basement. Seeing movement, they opened fire, only to discover that they had killed two women and a baby. The entire platoon was immediately placed under arrest for war crimes.

While Bravo Troop prepared defensive positions in a townhouse, two teenage boys ran up yelling that an American soldier had raped their sister. Obviously their yelling was going to warn the enemy of the troop's location. The Bravo Troop commander quieted the boys and collected their information. Based on that information, he detained the suspect (who was hiding in another building) until criminal investigators could be called in.

In the open woodland outside the village, the MIAI crews of Charlie Troop were contending with hungry refugees seeking MREs and other handouts. Perimeter security held, but only after Charlie's commander did some corrective training. During the troop's first night in country, hungry refugees walked freely from tank to tank, unchallenged, asking each crew for a handout. Delta's problem was slightly different; they were besieged by vendors trying to sell them soda and candy — all of which were ever so tempting to the weary tankers.



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As Echo Troop moved toward the line of departure, they received a radio report that sniper fire and grenades had ravaged another troop's assembly area. The report stated that the terrorists were probably from a refugee camp just beyond the LD. The troop commander ordered the platoon nearest the refugee camp to pepper the camp with machine gun and grenade fire, and then to run the platoon's tanks through the camp, "so if we don't kill the terrorists, at least they won't have a home to which to return." The platoon leader hesitated before answering his company commander, then replied with a hearty "Roger!" At the AAR, the platoon leader stated, "I fired up the village to see if any civilians were present."

The regiment was not fighting in Vietnam or Bosnia, but in Kentucky, at the Armor School at Fort Knox. The regiment is the 16th Cavalry Regiment, responsible for the Armor Officer Basic Course, Armor Career Captain's Course, Armor Pre-Command Course, and the Armor and Cavalry (19K/19D) Basic and Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Courses. The junior leaders were students in AOBC, ACCC, BNCOC, or ANCOC.

The mission of the Armor School and the 16th Cavalry Regiment is to turn out warriors who are tactically proficient, self-confident, and adaptive, able to conduct any type of mission along the full spectrum of operations, and capable of doing so in a manner which honors Army values, the law of land warfare, and the inherent dignity and compassion of the American people. But how should the regiment train such warriors, warriors who will not only accomplish the mission but do so ethically? How can the regiment shape warriors who will choose the hard right over than the easy wrong?

The old, time honored method was to conduct classroom training and then test proficiency. These classes in the law of land warfare and ethical decisionmaking were often far removed from the reality of life in combat, and were often taught by special staff (chaplains and judge advocates) whose expertise in warfare was suspect. Students might draw some lessons from these classes, but often regarded them as one more gate to pass through on the road to graduation. Many of my students expressed frustration with school solutions which seem disconnected from the realities of combat.

In contrast, the commander of the 16th Cavalry Regiment has set a different course. The charge to the regiment is clear: fewer PowerPoint slides; more warfighting experience. My particular role was to get ethics out of the classroom and on the battlefield. People remember what they experience, they don't remember lectures. I want students to see and experience ethics in action, not to talk about ethics.

With this in mind, ethics is now embedded in every field exercise in which 16th Cavalry students participate. Each of the following vignettes occurred in the field during maneuver or MOUT training. These scenarios are constructed to follow one of three models. Many involve "civilians on the battlefield," but not all.

First are ethical dilemmas — what should a leader do when values collide? When the students are told to clear a refugee family out of a building so that it can be used for task force headquarters, the mission seems both immoral and unnecessary. How will they resolve the dilemma? Can they apply the ethical decisionmaking process outlined in *FM 22-100, Army Leadership, Be, Know, Do?* Will they carry out the orders, request the mission be re-examined, or perhaps ask for civil affairs help with the refugees?

Second are character issues — when the student knows an order is illegal, will he challenge or disobey the order? Will he question the intent of a superior? Can the student learn to clarify the intent of an order, rather than execute vague or contradictory guidance?

Third are issues involving the law of land warfare, or rules of engagement. During MOUT training, students wrestle with the legality and morality of placing an observation point in the steeple of a church building which has been destroyed, but which is still being used by the civilian population. During maneuver training, the rules of engagement allow buying products from local vendors, but is it a wise tactical move? In another scenario, soldiers are forbidden to give food to civilians, but still must contend with hungry civilians who might be sources of information — either to the Americans or the enemy.

Each scenario is tied to a specific learning objective and military task such as reporting a war crime, applying rules of engagement, disobeying and reporting an illegal order. Each scenario is linked to a situation likely to face students in the near future.

In many cases, the students have shown proficiency in ethical decision-making. In particular, students have usually been very good at not engaging noncombatants. But the results are not always pleasing. Students have shown a reluctance to take action regarding an allegation of a war crime by an American soldier; the successful resolution noted in the italics above happened only once. Students disobey or question an illegal order about half the time.

Students have made and will continue to make ethical mistakes on the battlefield at Fort Knox. It is better to make a mistake in Kentucky than Bosnia, Kosovo, or a battlefield of the future. By

exposing our warriors to the ethical challenges of combat while they are in training, Fort Knox is turning out leaders fully capable of defeating the enemy while protecting the weak and guarding the innocent.

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand. I do the task several times and I know. I do the task many times, and I master the task."

— Confucius

Epilogue: Military Ethics in the War Against Terrorism

By the end of initial entry training, every soldier knows that he or she should disobey an illegal order, report suspected war crimes, and intervene to prevent the murder or rape of innocents. However, having the character to do the right thing is a wholly different matter from simply knowing the right thing to do.

The U.S. Army is greatly enriched by the example of Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, who used his helicopter to intervene in the massacre at My Lai. Hugh Thompson is an example of both knowing the right thing to do and actually doing the harder right rather than the easier wrong. The 16th Cavalry Regiment aims to graduate armor leaders who will emulate Mr. Thompson's example. All too often the study of military ethics takes place in the classroom. Students learning in the classroom are often absolutely sure they will recognize an illegal order if they get one, and that they will do the right thing. Taking ethics to the field gives them a chance to see that what is crystal clear in the classroom often is less clear in the fog of war — but the fog of war is no excuse to give up on the call to be "proud of all we have done" (Army) and "keep our honor clean" (USMC). Army Values are meant to be lived, not just taught.

The Army officers of today (along with the Marine Corps officers who both teach and train here at Fort Knox) will face immense challenges during the next few years. At a recent conference at the U.S. Army War College, participants wondered if the American military is a victim of its own success. The increasing use of precision guided weapons and the infantry doctrine of precision urban operations have created

an expectation that war can be fought without any collateral damage. Yet while war may be more precise, and collateral damage in Afghanistan much less than expected, the international furor over bombing a Red Cross warehouse shows that any collateral damage seems unacceptable to at least the international press — and that the American people certainly expect collateral damage to be limited.

The war on terrorism may involve us in guerrilla warfare once again. In Vietnam, the problem of deciding who was a combatant (and who was not) led both individual soldiers and our society to wrestle with the nature of a war in which the enemy takes advantage of our rules of engagement. Guerrilla fighters may wear civilian clothes, plant bombs in markets, use ambulances to transport weapons and troops, and employ children as combatants. The recent hostile reaction to Israeli decisions to deny ambulances access to battle scenes, based on the Israeli allegation that ambulances have been used to transport Palestinian fighters, should give us pause to consider both the allegation of misuse of medical vehicles by a guerrilla force and how propaganda alleging violations of the Geneva Conventions may be deceitfully used against American forces.

In the winter 2001-2002 issue of *Parameters*, P.W. Singer tells the story of a patrol of the British Royal Irish Regiment who were taken prisoner when their squad commander "was unwilling to fire on 'children armed with AKs.'" The increasing use of child soldiers will pose ethical, tactical, and morale problems for American commanders who may have to order the killing of children in battle. Every American commander should read Singer's perceptive article, "Caution: Children at War."

Part of leading soldiers is being prepared to deal with the sometimes warped and criminal dark side of a few bad apples in our Army. The rape and murder of a child in the Balkans was partially redeemed by the forthright way the criminal case was handled by Army authorities. I have largely focused on battlefield tasks, but the specter of domestic violence continues to haunt the Army as it haunts American society. Here again, leaders must both know the right thing to do, and then choose the harder right.



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Military ethics is widely studied in America. These studies often deal with grand elements of military ethics: decisions about when to go to war; when surrender should be accepted and on what terms; if the use of airpower without a ground commitment is moral; and whether military tribunals are either legal or moral. These are important questions, but we must not forget that grand ethical arguments come down to a private first class with a rifle, who will have to decide whether or not to take some other person's life. The lives of ordinary people in Bosnia, Kosovo, Korea, Afghanistan, and places yet to be named depend as much (or more) on the decisions of individual American soldiers, who have not yet reached the age of 30, as they do on actions of heads of government and legislators. In many war-stricken provinces, an American second lieutenant is the mayor of a town and a staff sergeant is the police chief.

In a variation of the "three-block war" we now have the three-faction war. At one and the same moment, our nation may have soldiers engaged in peacekeeping, peacemaking or enforcement, and full-spectrum warfare in either separate theaters or within a few kilometers of one another. Now, as never before, our soldiers need to move fluidly from restrictive to loose rules of engagement and from peacekeeping to all-out combat. They will need to do this while keeping their moral compasses intact.

In his book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, LTC Dave Grossman talks

about the terrible price that soldiers pay when they are asked to kill. Prior to 11 September, many soldiers rightly assumed that they would probably never fire a weapon in anger. While legions of soldiers have deployed in the past few years, usually on peacekeeping duties, few actually heard shots fired in anger. Now the world has changed. Many more soldiers may face the need to fire a weapon with the intent of killing another human being. And the stresses that Grossman documents will confront a great many soldiers.

In the March-April 2002 issue of *Military Review*, MAJ Peter Kilner makes a compelling argument in his article "Military Leaders' Obligation to Justify Killing in War." Kilner astutely reasons that soldiers who cannot morally justify what they are asked to do will either hesitate on the battlefield or suffer ill effects later (especially post-traumatic stress disorder). Much of military training is designed to prevent that hesitation, but without resolving the moral quandary that is combat. Kilner makes a strong argument that leaders must make a moral case before they ask soldiers to kill. Unfortunately, his article is much better at stating the need to justify killing than actually giving such justification.

American military leaders, especially junior leaders, need to think through why we expect soldiers and their leaders to "do the right thing." I have heard many arguments based on consequences: "so we don't lose the support of the American people;" "so we don't lose the support of our allies;" "so that no American soldier ends up being

featured as a war criminal on CNN or the cover of *Time* magazine;" and "so that we do not antagonize the local population." These are all valid arguments, but we need to look at military ethics and character through the lens of a moral strain that runs through every religion I have studied: thou shalt not intentionally take the life of an innocent; thou shalt not bring harm to the innocent and defenseless; and thou shalt protect the orphan and the widow. These are absolute values, not subject to negotiation based on an expected outcome. As an American and as a soldier, I may value the lives of American soldiers more than those of most other kinds of people; in the eyes of God all lives are infinitely and equally valuable. And so we strive to know the right, to do the right, to reject the easier wrong, and to teach, coach, and mentor our fellow soldiers to do the same.

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